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ABSTRACT

As the position of bibliographic instruction within academic libraries continues to be more and more important, the question still remains as to why so many good bibliographic instruction librarians suffer from emotional "blahs" and eventual burnout. The answer does not lie in character flaws of the librarians, nor simply in an ever-increasing workload. The behavior demonstrates a librarian's changing attitude toward bibliographic instruction that is the result of the inherent differences between the librarian's personal attitude and the collective attitude toward bibliographic instruction which derives from the attitudes of all those involved--students, faculty, staff, and administration. (Author/SWC)

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BI WITH AN ATTITUDE: OR ATTITUDINAL FACTORS IN BIBLIOGRAPHIC INSTRUCTION

Layne Pierce

ABSTRACT

As the position of bibliographic instruction within academic libraries continues to be more and more important, the question still remains as to why so many good bibliographic instruction librarians suffer from emotional blahs and eventual burnout. The author suggests that the answer does not lie in character flaws of the librarians, or simply in an ever-increasing workload, but rather is a behavior demonstrating a librarians changing attitude toward bibliographic instruction as the result of the inherent differences between the librarians personal attitude and the collective attitude of bibliographic instruction which derives from the attitudes of all those involved.

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In colloquial language, "to have an attitude" means to be "surly or "aggressive", or "overly confident." And I think I can safely say this is something most of us would not want for bibliographic instruction, I mean "bibliographic instructors" in black leather jackets, and combat boots. No. this is not the attitude we want for bibliographic instruction. Not that we don't need to be willing and able to stand up for bibliographic instruction, any time any place, or fight for the resources we need to do our job, but "have an attitude", no I don't think so.

So, if we don't "have an attitude", just why is it that the solution offered in the literature for what Russo calls, the 'Blahs' or the infamous 'burnout' is often for individual bibliographic instructors to "change their attitude."

Perhaps it's because the common definition of "attitude" is to have a persistent disposition to react towards life in a particular way. This implies that the problem is not things inherent to BI, but rather simply, a matter of one's overall personality. This in turn implies that if we are strong, if we are well adjusted, if we have a good attitude, then we will not be affected by constant change or the actions of others. If we do have a problem, all we have to do is apply our will to change our attitude.

Other coping mechanisms, however seem to imply that others are responsible. Among these are developing more realistic goals, reducing workoads, and decreasing criticism of pragmatic programs. and increasing feedback, rewards and recognition.

So, is changing one's attitude simply a matter of will, or is our attitude produced by things that have happened in the bibliographic instruction environment.

Clearly, much has happened in Bibliographic Instruction in the last 5 years as libraries and universities undergo the transition from institutions of higher education to institutions of higher learning. One good thing, for example, being the fact that we now see advertisements in which the primary job is bibliographic instruction with other duties as assigned, versus the old paradigm in which bibliographic instruction was always part of the other duties. Still, problems remain. As Russo put it in 1992,

> "While great strides have been made in bringing Bibliographic Instruction to the forefront of academic library work, controversy remains connected with the movement. Almost every BI article of a practical nature contains the same paragraph discussing the difficulty of reaching uninterested, unmotivated students and the librarian's dilemma of trying to remain excited about instruction after giving the same lecture to the fortieth class."

To make matters worse, it is not just the mediocre or the incompetent who drift first into the apathy, indifference and rote imitation of what Russo called the "Bibliographic Insturction Blahs", but unfortunately many of the best in BI, those that James Rettig described as

> "librarians at their peak, those whose knowledge of reference sources is encyclopedic, and whose BI lectures are smooth and thorough."

It is these we were losing in 1984, when Rettig wrote, in 1992, when Russo's article appeared, and I would suggest to you, ladies and gentlemen, that it is many of those we are losing today.

And actually, it is troubling to think of so many weak willed librarians, getting into Bibliographic Instruction in the first place. Of course this is the author's weak attempt at humor, but what I want to suggest to you today, however, is that there is another way to consider the relationship between attitude and the emotional side of BI, and that is to consider the attitude of individual BI librarians as part of a system. And that system consists of the attitudes, both individually and collectively, of all those involved in BI. In this system attitudes would be defined in a more complex fashion.

In accordance with the definition of attitude found in the Encyclopedia of Psychology, an attitude in this system would like the more common definition reflect a disposition to behave in a positive or negative way, but rather than an attitude towards

life, it would reflect an attitude towards bibliographic instruction.

To better understand such a system, let me briefly state some very general principles of such an attitudinal system.

To begin with let's consider the complete definition of attitude as defined by the Encyclopedia of Psychology:

> "the disposition to respond favorably or unfavorably to to an object, person, institution or event. As a hypothetical construct it cannot be observed, but must be inferred from responses that reflect positive or negative evaluations."

In other words our attitudes are inferred from what we say and what we do.

In our case today, of course the object of our attitude is bibliographic instruction. The most important characteristics of an "attitude are:

1. Beliefs - representing people's subjective knowledge about the world and themselves - are the primary determinants of attitudes.
2. The greater the number of beliefs that associate the object with positive attributes, and the smaller the number of negative attributes, the more favorable is the resulting attitude towards the object.

The point here is that a number of beliefs, not just one come together in the formation of an attitude. Also in our framework we

need to keep in mind, that the beliefs that determine attitudes are formed from the information we have about ourselves and about our social environment.

This is very important because the library itself is a social construct. It did not spring up just because someone willed it to be, nor did it arise from its environment. It is a social construct and this means as Ross Atkinson stated it in the book Information Technology and the Remaking of the University Library that:

> "Although the function of the library is to relate things to each other and to put people in a position to locate and understand these things, the more elemental forces that drive the library and its use are the relationships among the people using the resources rather than the relationships among the things themselves."

I would add here, that I believe the term "people using resources" means much more than simply the patrons.

But if the library is a social environment in which the relationships among patrons, staff, faculty and administration are the elemental forces, then so I would argue is bibliographic instruction.

The second important thing we need to consider, is just where do we get information about our social environment.

There are 3 basic sources of information:

1. Direct Expererience

2. Second-hand Information

3. Inferences

Direct experience leads to the formation of beliefs that are held with the greatest confidence and greatest resistance to change. Second-hand information exists in much greater quantity than direct experience, simply because there are limits to the number and kinds of beliefs than can be formed by way of direct experience. It can come to us from conversations with others, or from the variety of sources such as television, radio, newspapers, books, and yes even the internet. The third kind of information forming beliefs are inferences. Inferences are essentially attempts to draw conclusions from incomplete or insufficient data. Inferences are subject to biases. There are motivational biases which are characterized by a tendency to draw inferences that serve the individual's needs and desires, and there are cognitive biases which arise because of people's limited ability to attend to and properly process all the information available to them. This of course gives us another reason to stress the importance of

information literacy. All bibliographic instruction staff know that we must stamp out cognitive biases. If one looks at the attitudinal model I've been describing, however, one sees that with regards to the fundamental relationships between information, beliefs, attitude and behavior, that all of these elements exist at the same time, and all influence and are influenced by each other. Having established a definition and put in place a mental framework for our more complex definition of attitude, and having applied it to bibliographic instruction, the question remains, so what? What difference does it make? And to answer the question, I would like to offer the following advantages:

1. FOCUS: By focusing on the attitude towards BI, it is possible to distinguish the problems that specifically relate to BI, from those that are more general in nature. There is for example a big difference on someone who is burned out on life in general, burned out on the profession, and burned out on Bibliographic instruction.

2. EDUCATION: By allowing that BI is more than just pedagogy and content, and considering the attitude of all those involved in BI, not just the BI instructors, but students, faculty both library and non-library, staff, administration, perhaps even legislators, we can address our function as

educators in a way that also addresses motivation. Our job is tough in BI because we have to simultaneously address students attitudes toward BI, at the same time that we are addressing their information gathering skills. This model let's us accept the fact that for BI to be successful, the attitudes of others are just as our own.

3. COLLABORATION:

A great deal has been written about the need for librarians to go out into the academic community and collaborate with non-library faculty. In BI this could mean consultation, or it could mean team teaching, or it could mean committee work, regardless, this model gives us a check-list of attitudinal factors that must be addressed. True collaboration means establishing a common attitude towards BI, one that is cognizant of the beliefs of others as well as our own.

4. EVALUATION:

Evaluation of BI is called for in the literature, but we must build in complexity and redundancy into our evaluations, and be wary of automatically assuming a particular behavior reflects a particular attitude.

5. DIVERSITY OF ATTITUDES:

Given the complexity of attitude formation, and the number of factors, individual attitudes can vary greatly. Some variance will be caused by a difference in beliefs, some by a difference in information about the social environment, some by a difference in attitude reflecting behavior. This model reveals that complexity. It might for example be possible to have (2) individuals working in BI, who both have a positive attitude towards life, but who have radically different attitudes towards BI. The first individual might say something like this:

> "I'm not sure we should be "educating" students but I am sure we should answer their questions. I think that we should dismantle barriers rather than train people to climb over them...In many ways we should go back to the 60's; not to closed stacks, but to setting things up to be as simple as possible for the majority of students, and providing personal service to those who need more. The problem with user education is that it provides the answer before the question has arisen. This is presumptuous. It may even be superfluous."

Now imagine another BI faculty member who stands up and says the following:

> "It is not enough that the books are cared for properly are well arranged, and never lost. It is not enough if the librarian can readily produce any book asked for. It is not enough that he can, when asked, give advise as the best books in his collection on any given subject.. The librarian must put every facility in the way of the reader, so they shall be led from good to better. The librarian must teach them how, after studying their own wants, they may themselves select their reading wisely."

The second faculty member, by the way, was quoting a fellow named Melville Dewey, writing in v.1:1 of the American Library Journal.

To conclude then, however we need to go back to the beginning. If BI has an attitude it is not the one of belligerence that the title implied, rather it is one that represents the merging of collective and individual attitudes of all the participants in bibliographic instruction. collective and individual attitudes of all those involved. The "blahs" and "burnout" are not going to go away soon, but they can be better understood as behavior demonstrating attitudes. These attitudes don't arise simply from a generally positive or negative view towards life, but rather by With regards to connecting attitude and the emotional side of Bibliographic Instruction, this view of attitude suggests that the blahs and burnout are manifested as the behaviors so often described in the literature. Behaviors such as seeking to avoid BI sessions, or having an apathetic, or indifferent attitude toward BI session preparation or an unwillingness to teach new things in new ways. When we stop there, however, we only get half the picture. We only get this portion of the model, one that basically considers those behaviors as arising from an overall bad attitude, or an inability or lack of will to deal with changes in the BI social environment. I would suggest that we need to always consider the

rest of the model. We need to consider the belief system and the information acquisition that formed it. The view of attitude as an expression of the individuals will, leaves the individual essentially isolated from the rest of the social environment. The view of attitude as conditioned by the environment leaves the individual at the mercy of the environment. The view of attitude I am taking here today, says that BI does have an attitude and that it is a complex system based on information acquisition and beliefs. In order for us to understand why an individual, even one of great ability, goes through burnout, we must look not only at the behavior that infers the attitude, but also at the beliefs individual and collective that determined the attitude. BI instructors must not be lulled into believing all burnout and blahs are caused by the same attitudinal factors, and administration must avoid solutions based on one-size fits all.

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